INTERVIEWEE: Christopher Smith

INTERVIEWER: Pat Fitzpatrick

DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 26, 2022

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: 8 Pheasant Ridge Dr., Asheville, NC

PAT FITZPATRICK: It's December 26th, at 2:10 in the afternoon and I am here with Father Christopher Smith.

CHRISTOPHER SMITH: Just Christopher Smith.

PF: Just Christopher Smith.

CS: My daical title is Mister.

PF: Oh, it is. Okay. I know nothing about the ins and outs of that.

CS: It's so confusing. It's all right.

PF: Okay. Well, this is Mr. Christopher Smith and I am just meeting him today. I am happy to meet him and happy that he's here in my home. And so we will begin an interview.

Okay. Tell me about your history here in Asheville. I understand you were born here in Asheville and we can just follow that. We like to know the areas that you lived in.

CS: Sure.

PF: And so on, like that.

CS: Well, I was born in 1988, in March, at Memorial Mission. At that time there was two hospitals, Memorial Mission and St. Joseph's. And all babies were born at Memorial Mission. I lived and grew up in the same house. My parents still live there. It's 193 Tacoma Circle, which is in Montford.

And so, yeah, I grew up in that house and I lived there until I went off to college. And then when I returned from college and then a very brief

career as a pharmaceutical chemist, and moved back to Asheville, I lived in Montford with my folks for a while. And then I moved over to--I don't know what the neighborhood would be called--it's Woodrow Street, which is right off of Merrimon Avenue. I don't know what that little neighborhood is called. I guess Five Points, maybe.

PF: Yeah, it could be.

CS: That's where I've lived in Asheville. And I lived there until I left, I entered the Society of Jesus in 2015.

PF: Then what was your progression there? I don't know the stages within the--

CS: Sure. Not only is it just a regular, we'll call it diocesan priesthood, which is what most priests are who work for a bishop, in most parishes. Their stages of formation are kind of complex in and of themselves. I'm what's called a religionist, which is someone who takes vows and has a kind of particular way of serving particular populations or a particular mission in the church. And our formation is even more confusing.

So I'm a Jesuit and there are, I guess five stages of becoming a Jesuit. The first is two years called Novitiate. And I did my Novitiate in Syracuse, New York. Novitiate is a time of praying. It's a time of working with the poor, a time of learning how to live as a Jesuit. And a time of testing if you really want to do it and if the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits really want you to do it. Yeah. A kind of mutual thing.

At the end of Novitiate, if you choose to go on and you're permitted to go on, you take vows. Vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. And then you move to the next stage which is called First Study. The primary goal of First Studies is philosophy, because the Catholic church requires all priests

to have a substantial background in both philosophy and theology before they are ordained.

So, the next three years, my First Study I did in Chicago. I got a masters in philosophy and on the side a masters in chemistry at Loyola University, Chicago. So that's the second stage.

After that, we go to something called Regency, which is an opportunity to take a break from studies, where we just work doing Jesuit work, mostly schools. I'm currently still in the Regency.

I did my first two years in Washington, DC, at Gonzaga College High School, which is really close to the capitol. I taught chemistry and biology there.

And now I'm doing another year of Regency in Baltimore and working at Cristo Rey, which is a Jesuit type of school that works with historically disadvantaged people. And I'll be teaching remedial senior math.

PF: Wow.

CS: Pray for me. Hopefully, you know, if I progress beyond this stage, I'll go to theology and study that for three years. After that, I'll be ordained a deacon and then a priest. And then work as a priest for a while.

And then we have one more final year, we call it Tertianship, after which you take what's called final vows. But it's a very, very long process.

I'm in my eighth year of being a Jesuit. I probably have four or five more before I'm a priest, and probably ten more, or more, before I'm finally ____.

PF: My goodness. I didn't dream at all that it was that long of a...is that the path that most priests follow?

CS: No, ma'am. The vast majority of priests is much shorter. Ours, the Jesuits formation is by far the longest in the Church.

PF: Oops.

CS: Yes. Amen.

PF: Are your parents happy they're not paying for this education?

CS: They are. And it is astronomical. It's amazing how much the Society invests in us. But they do it because our founder, our Holy Father Ignatius, he was alive during the time of the Reformation and the Counterreformation. And he saw how much damage was done to the Church and to the world by priests who didn't know anything, who were incompetent to be able to speak with academics of any subject.

But he wanted his sons, his followers, to be competent academically, intellectually rigorous, ready to kind of...

PF: And then the person themselves knows by then whether this is something they want to do the rest of their life, as well.

CS: Exactly.

PF: And your having that chemistry thing on the side there, is that something also, they also want them to have this kind of fall-back thing, or is that something you chose to do?

CS: Well, it's both. My undergraduate degree is in chemistry and I worked as a chemist before I worked as a teacher. When I was a teacher, I taught chemistry before I became a Jesuit.

So the Society, they like it if you have some other talent or interest. They encourage you to develop that and continue the study if you have the aptitude. So, yeah.

PF: And then when you lived in Asheville, where did you go to church at that time? As a child, was your family Catholic, you were born into a Catholic family?

CS: No, ma'am. My family was loosely--I guess not loosely. My father is very devout. My family was with the Religious Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers. So I was raised loosely Quaker.

My mom, at the time I was born, didn't really--I don't ever remember her going to meetings. She used to. But my dad pretty faithfully goes to meeting every first day, they call it. You know, Quakers have all these weird ways of speaking. They don't say Sunday, they say first day.

So I was raised in a loosely Quaker home. When I say loosely, you know, I was never forced to go to meetings and religion was never like a big topic for us. But I would go every once in a while. It was very boring though, because it's mostly silence. You know, when you're a kid, sitting in a very boring room silently, and outside the room, I remember very vividly there was this tire swing hanging in the tree. I would just look out at this swing and longingly, for the hour, just be bored. So, yeah. So that's how I was raised.

And I was a Quaker until I was 12 years old. When I was nine, my fourth grade class took a walking tour of downtown Asheville. It was about like immigrants and the contributions of immigrants. And so one of the places we stopped at was the Basilica. The Basilica where the architect was Guastavino, an immigrant. And I remember going into the church. I was so amazed. I had never seen anything so beautiful before. And I was so kind of entranced by all the windows and all the saints and all the, you know, the altar, the statues and just stuff. There was just so much more going on in the Catholic church than there was in the Quaker meeting.

So my parents, they live only about a mile away from the Basilica. And so I would just go walk up sometimes. And the door was always open. So I would walk up sometimes and just sit in the Basilica. I don't know, just sit and just be there. And so I kept coming back and eventually I decided that I would go to mass. And so, one day, you know, I walked up there and I went. I had no idea what was going on. Everyone knew when to sit and stand and do everything. I didn't know what to do. But what happened, afterwards, you know, I was this kid, you know, 11 years old, all by myself in church, and I was the only person under like 65, for daily mass, so I was noticeable. And all these little grandmothers and grandfathers, sweet old people, all have passed now, they all kind of bowed down and came back to see me after church and were so welcoming and kind to me. And that really made an impression on me.

PF: Now, was this black and white people?

CS: Uh-huh. Black and white and Asian, Filipinos. Yes. And that really made an impression upon me. So I went back.

PF: You felt welcome there.

CS: I did. It was home. So I kept going back and I decided a couple months later that I would become a Catholic. And so I told my parents. They were both okay with it. Cautious about it but they wanted us--my parents both encouraged me and my brother to find our spiritual home wherever we found our spiritual home.

Now, my father had had very negative experiences with the Catholic church of Asheville. He was okay with me going to church, but he was very insistent that along with learning all the good things about the church, and the noble things and the beautiful things, that I also learned about all the

awful things that the church had done, that the nuns never taught him about. So if I did that, which I did, he was okay.

So a year later I was baptized. I had a first communion, was confirmed a Catholic when I was 12, and I've been Catholic every since.

PF: And been a member of the parish there?

CS: Of St. Lawrence, uh-huh.

PF: Now, have you ever served--well, you would serve there as a pastor, but you're not--

CS: No. So, the Basilica is a parish in the Diocese of Charlotte. As such, it's what we call secular priests or diocesan priests. Diocesan priests, secular priests, they don't take vows like I do. So they don't have a vow of poverty, they are paid a salary. You know, they work at the church but it's not the same as like--I'm a Jesuit, so I would never be sent to the basilica, because it's a diocesan church. There's a few Jesuit churches around the country. Our ministry is mostly teaching in schools and that kind of thing.

PF: What you said there--I mean, I'm not Catholic and I don't have any background in learning about it, as such. But when you said like the pastors don't have the vows of da da da. I just assumed everybody serving in the church, that was of the church, you know, like had a title, priest or pastor or what, would have vows, the same vows.

CS: Yes.

PF: That was universal, I thought.

CS: No, it's not. Most priests don't take vows. Most priests, you know, they have retirement that they save for, they own cars, they own property, et cetera. Those types of priest are called secular priests. But the average priest is a secular priest.

The other type of priests are what are called religious priests, which is a funny title because we think that all priests would be religious. Religious priests vow poverty, chastity and obedience. So they don't own any property individually, themselves. They abstain from all types of sexual, you know, sexual expression. And they're obedient to a superior God. Yeah.

PF: See, I told you I learn more from these interviews than anybody else.

CS: [Chuckles] Well, there you go.

PF: Just ask all the questions. Well, I'll be darned. Well, what has been your experience, then, at St. Lawrence, since that's kind of the basis for what we had together on here.

CS: Sure.

PF: How you have you been treated. I mean, it started out certainly beautiful.

CS: And it continues to be beautiful. I mean, the Basilica always feels like home and it always felt like home to me. I mean, literally, there's no place on earth that I feel more comfortable or kind of closer to God, or more at peace than the Basilica. It continues to be, and always has been.

And it's really an interesting contrast, my experience with the experience of my father. Who, as I said earlier, is a devout Quaker now, but was not always a Quaker. He was raised Baptist. He was raised on Adam Street, which is just, you know, it's off of South French Broad, near where they call it Nasty Branch and in the white part of town. And he was raised by a single mother. And he, his mother, his brothers and his sisters, they lived with their mom and with his grandparents, in a house over there. They were all Baptists. My great-grandfather was a deacon in the Baptist church.

But, over in that neighborhood, over on Walton Street, that school for black people, at that time, because they had segregation when he was raised. He was born in 1952. The best school was St. Anthony's. How much I'm sure you heard about it, if you talked to Lonnie Gilliam, who actually went to school there.

PF: Uh-huh.

CS: But St. Anthony's was a Catholic school. Was founded and run by the Third Order Franciscan Sisters of Allegheny, Pennsylvania. A kind of random-sounding order. How they got to Asheville, who knows. So it was a Franciscan school and staffed by at first a Franciscan priest and Franciscan nuns. Later, diocesan priests and Franciscan nuns, until it was closed.

So my grandmother very, very much believed in education. She wanted a better life for her children. And she insisted that my father, his elder sister Roselia, my father Robert, his younger brother John, and youngest sister Dee, they all go to the Catholic school. And so they went to St. Anthony's, and as part of their education, I guess, they had to go to mass. And my father liked it. They made him an altar boy, even before he was Catholic. He even learned to say a little mass, with things in Latin.

And going there, he wanted to become Catholic. So his family was okay with it. I think they got a discount for education, so they were even more open to accepting it.

PF [Laughter]

CS: But he was conditionally-he was baptized a Baptist. Then he was conditionally baptized Catholic, because at that time the Church had not decided whether or not they considered Baptist baptisms to count. So people who became Catholic had to be conditionally baptized, just in case they

didn't count they were baptized. But he was conditionally baptized, he was confirmed and had his First Communion at St. Anthony's, and was very, very devout. So, actually, not just him, but all of his brothers and sisters, they were all baptized there.

And he loved his church. He was very involved in his church until it closed. Now, he didn't know this. It was actually before he was born, but the bishop of all of North Carolina at that time, Vincent Waters, had asked the pastors of black churches and white churches in North Carolina to desegregate, to come together. But he didn't tell them how he wanted for them to do that. How he expected them to do that. So nothing happened.

He threatened, though, that if they didn't do it, that he would close all the black churches to force the integration of the churches. Because I think--he was a Southerner. And he has a very interesting life story. But I think that he thought that poor black people, having to go to the black churches was like kind of a stigma, because they were usually small and a little bit more rickety and such. He didn't understand that they were the pride of the community where they were, the community center.

So, I mean, understandably, with no instructions or help or anything to desegregate, the pastors of black and white churches didn't, you know, integrate. So Bishop Waters followed through with his threat and closed all the black churches in North Carolina, including St. Anthony's. So my father and his siblings were forced to go to the beautiful white church in downtown, the church that would become my church.

Now, when I came along, you know, in 1999 was the first time I went to mass, by that time they had become very welcoming and lovely. But when he started going there, like I guess it was the sixties, people were not welcoming and lovely. People wouldn't seat them. You know, people--I've

heard stories about the doors being locked for church. You know, when they saw black people coming into the church. And just extremely clear that these people were not welcome.

So the vast majority of them left. It was a very large, at the time, Catholics were a very small percentage of Asheville's population. But there was a substantial percentage of that Catholic population was black, was St. Anthony's. But that has dwindled to almost nothing now. And there are so many people that have left the church, including my father.

So you can imagine how it was for my father to see me start going to church there. He had a lot of feelings about at St. Lawrence, most of them negative.

PF: And, also, not wanting you to be hurt later on, if you're a child.

CS: Exactly. But to his credit, I mean, my dad until--now he's sick, but for a long time he would come at Christmas and at Easter with my mom. My mom converted two years after I did. She's been very supportive, very supportive of my vocation, which I'm very grateful for, considering what he was getting.

PF: And how do you think the church there has advanced, as far as St. Lawrence today?

CS: Sure. Well, I think that the major thing that's happened is the church has had at least two black pastors, that I know of. The first was--t the time he was Father Joseph Howze, who was one of the first black priests ordained for the diocese in North Carolina. He was actually the pastor at St. Anthony's, and when St. Anthony's closed they made him the pastor of St. Lawrence. Which you can imagine, that was quite an upheaval.

PF: Yes. [Laughter] If they weren't happy before, with you sitting in a pew.

CS: Exactly. In front of the altar, yeah. But, you know, he stuck it out. Eventually he became the first black, what we call "ordinary" in the United States. An ordinary is a bishop who has kind of the control, has responsibility over a territory, who runs a diocese. There are some bishops that don't have any territory, they just held it.

PF: So the position that Waters had before.

CS: Like that, yeah, down in Mississippi. He was ordained a bishop of Biloxi, Mississippi.

PF: Now his name is H-o-w-z-e?

CS: Yes. Uh-huh.

PF: I think he did a lot, just like sticking it out, you know. To help heal the transition. But after him, in the year 2000, right after I was baptized, confirmed, first communion, we got another black pastor named Father Wilbur Thomas, who just died. But he was our pastor for 18 years, which in Church time is humongous, a ridiculously long time to be a pastor. And I think he did a lot to bring people together.

So I think the Church has come a long way. I think it's very welcoming. But the sad truth is that, you know, the families and the people who left St. Anthony's, left the Church after St. Anthony's, are gone. And there's just so few black Catholics left. And even the black Catholics that are left that I know, their children aren't really, you know, gung-ho about the Church. As they die, one by one, like that part of our history and that part of our community is gone.

PF: And where does it go from here? Now, would you not though say that may be the truth even with the white Catholic families?

CS: Sure.

PF: It seems like the young people today, in general, are not church-goers. My daughter, my youngest daughter, she lives in West Asheville now, she's a member at Abernethy Methodist Church. And there are, it's a smallish congregation and there are six people of the ones who do go regularly that are over 95.

CS: Yeah.

PF: And mostly middle-aged, mostly grandparents that are the rest of them. She's 56 and she's considered one of the younger people.

CS: Yeah, religion in general is facing demographic shifts. I mean, it's so noticeable in terms of the black Catholics here.

PF: Yeah, it would be. Predominantly, Baptists are--are they mostly?

CS: The black people? I don't know. There's a lot of black Baptists.

PF: That's the tradition, I guess, throughout the South.

CS: Also, you know, the AME and AME Zion are two distinct denominations. There's the Church of God in Christ, which is another black denomination. So there are a lot of kind of protestant black Churches.

PF: Where they are comfortable.

CS: Uh-huh.

PF: Well, how do you see it going? Within the Church, is there any effort to make it more comfortable for--especially in this time when racism is on every news broadcast.

CS: You know what is so disappointing about it, the Catholic church, and I'm loving every church, because my life is dedicated, my life is dedicated to it, but when the one real weakness of the Catholic church is that we have always been, and continue to be, extremely mediocre in terms of advancing any cause that's right. You know, we've always been, you know, is a denomination that's gigantic, a church that's gigantic. So the *status quo*

tends to be kind of where we fall. Our bishop has been and continues to be, you know, remarkably milquetoast on everything. And so it's been sad to see so much silence about issues with race. But that's is nothing new for the United States. And the bishops have never, you know, led any charges against them.

PF: Well, regarding other subjects, as well, and that keep them safe, like you say, the *status quo*.

CS: Exactly. So, no, I don't see anything really happening. One thing that really encourages me is the work I'm going to be doing, you know, working at Cristo Rey School, which are Jesuit schools.

PF: How do you spell that?

CS: Sure. It's C-r-i-s-t-o. C-r-i-s-t-o, space, Rey.

PF: R-e-y, okay.

CS: Christ the King is dead.

PF: And they're in that order of Jesuit schools, that are founded for, mostly for Black and Latino kids. And they are sponsored by corporate sponsors who agree to give internship to the kids. So the kids would do work and also go to school. And as they work, they get to network and, you know, learn how to take part in our workplace today, and how to speak to people, you know, in their professional *forte* and whatever.

That type of outreach really gives me, really encourages me. Although we don't see a lot of black people. Most of our students are protestant and remain protestant. That, to me, is one ray of light the church is kind of shining on black and brown folk.

But in terms of my diocese, or in terms of the Church in Asheville or in Charlotte. The Charlotte diocese of North Carolina, there's not a lot. There's really not a lot. Black people tend to be an afterthought. It feels like

that. You know, it was never, never the most important thing and never a focus to anything.

PF: Is there anything that you would like to have in your interview, about anything: about Asheville in general, about the Church, or anything you want to speak about? With your name on it.

CS: Well, you know, I'm generally a person of just a few words.

PF: Okay. All right.

CS: I was ____ to think of anything.

PF: Well, you strike me as a happy person and you're content with what you are doing, you're doing what you choose to do, so maybe that just kind of says it all. Keeps you in your equilibrium.

CS:: Yes. Maybe so. Yes.

PF: Okay. Well, we can conclude this and then while we're chatting, you can add anything else you want to. We can turn it back on, if I do it correctly.

CS: [Laughing]

END OF CHRISTOPHER SMITH INTERVIEW